

# 'Another Day, Another Demand': How Parents and Children Negotiate Consumption Matters

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the various kinds of pressure placed on children to consume and how their parents view and deal with this. It focuses on the consumption of clothing, the marketing of 'fashion' to youngsters and the commercial opportunities presented to children to construct a particular image of themselves through their choice of attire. Related to these issues are the range of constraints placed upon children's consumption as they desire to seek independence from their parents yet remain embroiled in their social networks where they seek belonging, conformity and inclusion. Leading on from this, the paper goes on to explore whether and to what extent children's increasing engagement with consumer culture affects the parent-child relationship.

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**Keywords:** *Consumption, Children, Parents, Family Relations, Fashion.*

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## Introduction

**1.1** This paper identifies and develops some of the sociological issues which arise from an examination of children's consumption, particularly the ways in which consumption influences the character of generational relations between parents and children within family households. In doing so, key issues will be explored, such as: how consumption relates to power dynamics between parents and children; to what extent children use 'pester power' or the 'nag factor' when negotiating consumption matters with adults, and; the everyday conflicts and challenges that confront both parents and children during the consumption process. Using data from focus groups with parents and children (conducted separately) alongside ethnographic work with families, the above issues will be explored through an examination of the consumption of children's clothing, centered around the practices and experiences of children in the 6 to 11 age group and the corresponding tensions faced by their parents<sup>[1]</sup>.

**1.2** The sheer expansion of the children's market and the corresponding roles of children as consumers bespeak the need for a sociological examination of the political and cultural significance of children as consuming agents. To state the situation succinctly, children's consumption is now both big news and big business. Industry research such as that undertaken by Mintel Marketing Intelligence (2003), for example, recognises children as a key consumer sector, worthy of its own annual reports (such as childrenswear and toys). Mintel in fact confirm that the market of childrenswear is growing strongly (by 5% in 2002 compared with 2001) and that retail competition is very intense with both designer labels (e.g. Quicksilver, DKNY, and Burberry) and everyday-low-price retailers (e.g. Matalan, Asda and Tesco) proving to be huge growth sectors. Also, with regards to childrenswear, (including outerwear, underwear, footwear and accessories) commercial data from Next PLC, the leading children's clothing retailer, reveals a total spend of £4.3 billion in 2002 (Next Market Research Presentation). So too, media interest in children and consumption has recently increased, perhaps most notably in the area of fashion and the rise of the so-called 'tweenager' - the more worldly-wise, fashion-conscious and media-aware children with substantial purchasing power (Quinion 2001)<sup>[2]</sup>.

**1.3** We must also acknowledge the wider socio-economic context which has led to the emergence and market significance of tweenagers. These are highlighted in Rice's (2000) profile of the typical tweenager -- they have lived through a decade of economic boom and are now therefore fairly affluent, they are often from small families with dual earners ensuring households with sizeable disposable incomes, they are able to draw upon strategies such as 'pester power' to get their own way, and they have a high awareness of labels, media and technology. In addition to this, Cook and Kaiser (2004) further argue that we cannot understand the contemporary tweenager without recognising the historical development of this age-based stage of the life course as a marketing and merchandising category. All in all, according to Rice, the affluent, aspirational and apparently sophisticated tween consumer is maturing much faster than his or her predecessor. Therefore, given the size of the children's market and its growing economic and cultural

significance, it is surprising that there is little sociological attention paid to it. Indeed, in many ways, this piece tries to address the shortfall of sociological literature in Britain, identified by Martens et al (2004), which explores children as consumers, or as active members of distinct consumer subcultures<sup>[3]</sup>.

**1.4** The increasing participation of children in the sphere of consumption is a consequence too, we could suppose, of the growing recognition of the status of children as competent social actors, alongside their increasing economic activity<sup>[4]</sup>. These changing roles of children could be seen as an example of children's own agency realised through the commercial sphere - an agency, we must bear in mind, that is supported and promoted by the desire and need of capital to seek out new markets. Yet these above points need not lead us to the conclusion that children are completely free agents, exercising free will and choice at every turn. Whilst agency is important, it is not unconstrained by structure (Giddens, 1979; Archer, 2003). To this end, the material basis of children's consumption must not be overshadowed by a one-sided emphasis on choice and the ability to consume at will. Indeed, this piece will go on to present a whole range of objective and subjective constraints surrounding children's consumption. Similarly, it is worth stressing here the difference between children's 'needs' and 'wants'. White (1996), for instance, talks of the impact of global capitalism on perceptions of necessity to the extent that wants become needs (or 'false needs', as Marcuse (1964) termed them). This process in turn then links up to issues of social inclusion and exclusion whereby children believe that they *need* a pair of, say, £100 Nike trainers to be part of a group - making children's identity, in some ways, a type of structured construction.

**1.5** Two related issues stem from these above points. One involves the significance of clothing consumption as a source of children's individual identity and personal worth, specifically the symbolic value of children's clothing as a form of social inclusion and social exclusion, mediated by age and gender, ethnicity, household income, and geographical location, which in turn begs us to explore to what extent identities of children can be largely established through purposive adherence to a chosen consumer lifestyle (inclusive of the purchase of items such as fashion, food, leisure pursuits etc). Leading on from this are broader related topics such as the conspicuous nature of consumption and the construction/performance of self within the family and within peer group culture, tapping into larger issues of belonging and acceptance (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Goffman 1969; Giddens 1991). Children's consumption patterns may well furthermore function as a vehicle for social commentary (about the impact of mass production on the environment, for instance) or the communication of beliefs or values (such as buying fairtrade chocolate), helping to change the very nature of popular consumer issues themselves.

**1.6** The other issue encourages us to think of children as increasingly sophisticated consumers who are able to influence others (that is, having more voting power regarding consumption decisions within the family/household and using 'pester power' or the 'nag factor' as ways of exerting this power) and, equally, in turn, be influenced by others (i.e. taking into account the 'final say' of parents or peer pressure in the school/playground). In addition, we should not forget that family income and domestic economy clearly underpin spending plans and practices in relation to fashion and clothing - providing the material base of childhood from which any subsequent 'choices' can be made.

**1.7** It is here we arrive at the central interest of this paper - the role of generational relations in the consumption of children's clothing. Of course, like that of adults, children's identity formation (whether heavily consumption reliant or not) is thoroughly relational - that is, structured to varying extents in varying contexts by the opinion and conduct of others (such as the 'concerns' of parents). As we shall go on to see, interesting changes are taking place in the parent-child dynamic, as children not only now clearly use their status as savvy consumers to influence the consumer behaviour of their parents, but employ a number of strategies in interactions with parents in an attempt to positively influence decision outcomes.

## **The Inter-Generational Dynamics of Clothing Consumption**

**2.1** So, as mentioned above, a key issue to arise from this research is the inter-generational dynamics of clothing consumption with regards not only to the influence of parents on the clothing worn and chosen by their children, but also to changes in the parent-child dynamic itself, where children form opinion on and influence the clothing decisions of their parents. In this section I begin to explore the issues which influence these consuming matters.

**2.2** Exploring the parental role first. Parents seemed acutely aware of the encroachment of consumer cultures into the parent/child relationship, and had concerns accordingly. The most frequently mentioned concerns may be thematically outlined as follows and are not mutually exclusive:

- Cost
- Branded clothing and label culture
- Age-appropriateness

**2.3** The cost of children's clothing was of paramount concern in all seven of the focus groups we conducted with parents and was singled out as a frequent point of tension and consequent negotiation between themselves and their children. As participants in one focus group revealed:

**Daphne** - I still can't understand why they are so expensive. I mean I wonder why they

warrant charging £100 for a pair of trainers....

**Maggie** - Well I've put a set price limit on her. Then she knows she don't go above. Like I'll say to her up to like £30 or £15...but if she goes slightly over that's not too bad.

**Kath** - Yes they do like to push the boundaries don't they? You have to give them that though. I mean I can't... I can only say like 'That's not fair. If you have this then the money for everyone else will have to be less'. You can make them feel a bit guilty about it.

**2.4** The issue of cost was closely linked in the minds of parents to 'label culture' and the market positioning of branded clothing as aspirational purchases. Here, the problem seemed to lie in paying 'inappropriate' cost and not receiving value for money from your financial outlay. As two parents from a fairly affluent shire city bemoaned:

**Tony:** But it's getting what you pay for isn't it? There's that and there's also being ripped off with branded stuff where you are just paying extra for the name.

**Christina:** Because Daisy would at the end of the day, she would wear all of David Beckham's range and it would cost me a lot yeah, but she just wouldn't get value for money out of it.

**2.5** In this respect, parents spoke of feeling an 'emotional pressure' to buy their children labelled clothing – a point expanded later – and resented their children's lack of understanding of the emotional and economic implications of their 'wants': 'I don't think they think they are really asking for a lot. I think they just assume you know that that's their right', one mother told us. A similar discussion took place at a focus group held in an economically disadvantaged part of a Midlands city:

**Suzie:** Yeah, scandalous some of those prices.

**Becky** - I mean you can get a sweatshirt that's exactly the same as another sweatshirt but you put a label in it and it doubles the price. You know, but they want that one with the label in.

**Kath** – And the manufacturers know it as well don't they? Pester power....

**Daphne** - But to shop in places like Next or Gap, I have to wait for the sales. I can't afford the full price.

**Kath** - I begrudge paying 20, 30 to 40 per cent more just because it says Next or whatever particular label, you know. They are going to grow out of them or wear them out just as quickly.

**2.6** Along with cost and the lures of label culture, parents voiced concern over the 'age-appropriateness' of children's clothes. Particularly with regards to girls' fashions, it was felt that both the clothing industry and media representations of young women in general were encouraging children to grow up too soon and flaunt their bodies in an inappropriately sexualised way. 'Miniture adult wear' as one mother termed it, sought to be provocative and in turn placed children's bodies under the gaze of potentially dangerous viewers. This fear was vocalised in all seven of our focus groups, typified by the two short excerpts below:

**Joan** - I think that's why there's a lot of trouble going on, you know, with these girls with these small tops and things.

**Kate-** I mean if they are marketing flipping bras to a seven or eight year old it's a paedophile's dream isn't it?

**2.7** Such parental concerns of course tap into the moral minefield of what we market to young girls, how we 'sell' them idealised versions of themselves, and correspondingly, how we view them as members of society and how we expect them to present themselves.

**2.8** These three important concerns notwithstanding, perhaps the biggest concern identified by parents was 'peer pressure' - not exclusively upon their children but equally upon themselves to please their children and to 'present' their children in an appropriate manner. Parents taking part in a focus group in an English shire city debated this exact point:

**Kate:** Do any of you get the peer pressure? I mean, I don't know, you feel there is a peer pressure that your children...like you said you want your children to have it... and you are really proud of seeing your children turned out spot on... is the pressure not on you to think 'why shouldn't my child have whatever' and you get it for them? Does that make sense? Instead of thinking 'Oh I can't afford it anyway, so they'll just have to make do'?

**Mary:** Well I don't know whether you are like us but if they want something that much, like you say you feel pressured into buying it you'll think, 'Well I'll go without so and so and I'll get

them that'.

**Julie:** Because we're blaming the industry but we're as much to blame as well.

**Kate:** Well I'm saying yes, the peer pressure on us.

**2.9** As mentioned above, this 'peer pressure' was so effective in persuading parents to agree to consume as directed by their children not simply to make their children happy or to avoid conflict, but because it tapped into broader issues concerning how children 'represent' their parents and their family situation or how some parents may try to 'live through' their children and 'make up' for emotional and/or economic limitations they may have perceived in their own childhoods. This harks back to Bourdieu's (1984) classic argument that childhood is the life course stage during which social class distinctions of 'taste' become embodied whether through the 'inheritance' of parental consumer tastes and practices, or through parental investment in children as 'trophies', whereby children's clothing may symbolise parental material capital (James et al. 1998). For instance, one mother told us that she thought 90% of the time parents consume 'because you are what your children are', whilst other parents agreed that children can and are being used to display affluence and taste in one-up-man-ship, competitive relationships between families:

**Pam:** Because this city is so cosmopolitan you can get away with loads and loads of different fashions. Whereas going outside they're really showing each other how much money they've got.

**Beverley:** But it is also because people who started earning the money moved out and bought their big houses, they've got an appearance to keep up.

**2.10** Because of the perceived penetration of childhood by cultures of consumption, parents felt a duty to educate their children about consuming responsibly - in other words, to teach them the value of money and to try to instill in their children some sense of perspective or 'common sense' amidst a commercial culture of abundance, choice and instant gratification. In this respect, several examples of consumer culture being portrayed almost as a kind of childhood disease came to light - a dangerous contagion waiting to take hold of children's minds and bodies: 'However much you try not to introduce it at home, it's there and it's bigger than it's ever been' (Kate), one mother told us, another agreed with her adding 'I think once one of your children's got it, you pass it down and it gets earlier and earlier' (Mary). If precautionary measures proved ineffective and children were thought to be in imminent danger of succumbing to the temptations of the marketplace, parental authority often came to the fore, overruling any consuming freedoms previously endowed upon children and demonstrating the capacity of parents to have different responses in different circumstances:

**Kate:** I think you have to be parents to a certain extent. They have to have some things that are sorted but I have to say to them you can't have everything and that introduces the value of money to them. We had a small incident in the playground with Liam (aged 5) because his football boots weren't cool. Now they cost me about twenty-five quid. They were Clark's football boots, they weren't Adidas, because they fit him and he can wear them so I just knocked it on the head, I just said to him like [...] you have to sort of say to them, you have to teach your child to go back and say 'well there's nothing wrong with my football boots, they fit me', instead of just giving in and buying, you introduce the value of things.

**2.11** However, despite the 'duty' felt by parents to set an example to their children of being a responsible, educated consumer and not pandering to their every request, parents in this focus group nevertheless went on to label themselves as 'gullible' and as making little real attempt to challenge the temptations and manipulations of commercial culture. Leading on from this, parents spoke of being complicit in the cycle of pull (demand) and push (supply) factors, simultaneously seeing their behaviour as being both influenced by and in turn influencing and reaffirming the successful psychology of the marketplace:

**Tony:** The thing is that us gullible parents keep buying the stuff and as long as we keep buying they'll market it.

**Mary:** We buy it so our kids aren't pushed out.

**Tony:** Exactly, they know that and that's why they market it in that way.

**2.12** This broader issue of parental versus corporate influence, with regards to the ownership and control of children's minds and actions, alongside rivaling social influences such as the mass media and the Internet which may be challenging the family as the primary agent of socialization needs also to be borne in mind in present and future research agendas. These types of concerns, tantamount to the corporate seduction of children, are not new however, and can be traced back to Ewen's (1976) classic critique of the homogenizing powers of mass culture which argues that the ideological control superimposed by the advertising industry is a disturbing example of the extension of bureaucratic, corporate surveillance over individual creative autonomy (see also Marcuse 1964, Packard 1957, Adorno and Horkheimer, 1977). The magnitude of these (potential) problems, recognised, as we have seen, in all of the parental focus groups

conducted in our research, has already been seized upon most publicly by a number of American interest groups who feel mass consumerism to be at odds with traditional 'family values' or indeed the imaginative creativity of children. The Center for a New American Dream (2004), for example, places the onus on parents to curtail the encroachment of commercialization into family life. 'Parents who resist consumerism for themselves', they state, 'are the ones who teach their children to resist it'. They go on to offer practical ways of achieving this: 'remove the logos from clothes, theirs and yours; talk with kids about why you're doing this; suggest to kids to design their own, personal logos; teach children to be doers and creators rather than shoppers and buyers'.

**2.13** So, to summarise the arguments made so far, it seems that parents have a number of concerns about their children's participation in consumer culture (cost, label culture, age-appropriate clothing) and indeed their own corresponding conduct as parents in it (peer pressure, educators of children, gullibility). In this sense the changing status of children as consumers has begun to alter the nature of the parental role, making the commercial sphere an important arena for the interplay and performance of parent/child dynamics.

### **Child Consumers: complexities and contradictions**

**3.1** As mentioned above, when thinking through the ways in which childhood may be changing from its penetration by various aspects of consumer culture, childrens' roles as savvy, sophisticated consumers and how they impact upon family life and generational boundaries are important points of discussion. It has been suggested that younger children (under 11's) are more likely to simply ask for things as opposed to their adolescent counterparts who employ a selection of influence strategies to 'get their own way' when it comes to requesting purchases from parents (Isla et al. 1987). In this next section of this paper I argue that, from the insights of our research at least, this is no longer the case, as children time and time again prove themselves to be confident and complex consuming agents.

**3.2** Children, at a younger and younger age, certainly draw upon a variety of discourses in making decisions about their own consuming (O'Donnell and Wardlow 2002), especially given their increasing, unmediated exposure to and familiarity with the Internet and other types of media, and may view such decision making in this context as a means of developing and establishing independence from parents and guardians. Their consumption can also be similarly viewed as a strategy of resistance to adult norms and as a subversion of control within the parent-child relationship (James 1982). Corrigan (1989) too has highlighted the significance of clothing to families and the power dynamics within them, focussing in particular on intra-familial flows of clothing such as giving and receiving between mothers and daughters. For example, in the mother-daughter relation, he argues, there is a marked transition from the mother being a more or less exclusive source of clothes to a phase where daughters *refuse* clothes bought or made by the mother. This typically occurred when daughters were in their early teens, where the previous mother/daughter consensus on clothes changed dramatically to mother/daughter conflict. Again, here, the process of becoming an adult is not unaffected from the commercial opportunities available to express this part of the lifecourse.

**3.3** So are such transitions apparent in the lives of the children who participated in our research? The above issues certainly come to light in a telling example of a 7 year old female from a rural village 'turning against' Barbie (now a brand of clothing and accessories which has expanded from the doll) as proof of no longer being a little girl -- pushing away and rejecting a former signifier of her childhood in an attempt to 'age up' into a more teenage style. 'Anything with Disney on or Barbie?' I asked her during a 'wardrobe audit':

**Megan:** No, no no!! Definitely not Barbie!

**Sharon:** You don't like Barbie?

**Megan's Mom:** No, she used to.

**Sharon:** Why don't you like Barbie?

**Megan's brother** (William, 9): She used to have this top with Barbie on.

**Megan:** She's too little for me.

**Sharon:** But you used to like her. Maybe she's OK for little girls?

**Megan's Mom:** Yeah I think I would say a year ago she stopped. So everything that has Barbie on Megan doesn't like.

**Sharon:** We've got a few sporty tops here, like these fleeces.

**Megan's Mom:** Yeah, that one has got 'Boston' on. That's had some wear.

**Megan:** Well I think that's quite sporty and this one I like.

**3.4** This very same transition - from an overtly feminine and young clothing brand like Barbie to more unisex, teenage sportswear - also came to light in each focus group held with parents: 'Grace would buy that stuff until she was about seven and then it was not the in-thing', said one mother from a Midlands city, 'She went on to all that sports stuff and what have you'. This change was attributed to the increasing culture of exclusion and inclusion children face in the playground as they grow up: 'Well kids get teased then', she added, 'If you've got Barbie dolls by the time you're seven or eight they take the mickey out of you. Grace hides hers now' (Daphne). Gender and age are therefore intertwined variables that structure the consuming norms of female childhoods.

**3.5** Moving on to another matter in the potential battleground for purchasing power between adults and children, much has appeared in the media in recent times about the phenomenon of 'pester power' and, at an emotional level, the ensuing guilt and anxiety parents may feel when faced with an onslaught of 'wants' by their children, and/or, at an economic level, the extensive budgeting and financial organisation required to meet the costs of extra consumption. In our project, instances of 'The Nag Factor' or 'The Art of Fine Whining' (alternative sound-bites to 'pester power') were indeed evident, with parents explaining the breadth of tactics their children might employ to 'get their own way'. Janet, a mother who lived in a remote rural village spoke of her 8-year-old daughter's method thus:

She's more subtle than just to pester. She wouldn't just ask repeatedly. She would, if it wasn't working, she'd leave it and she'd probably try another angle a day or two later. She wouldn't let it drop, but she would kind of work on my weaknesses and find a moment, and I would feel myself being handled.

**3.6** Another mother (from an English shire city) reports how it is not just girls that constantly ask for fashion purchases to be made, but that her 8-year-old son is guilty of the same behaviour:

**Kate** - If we are out shopping he's started just recently to whine for things 'oh can I have this, I like this, I like this' and we are having to say 'no, you are having things like that for Christmas and Birthday'. 'Aww, please can't we, can't we just have a coat', and it has just totally the reverse effect on me. It doesn't actually make me give in and give them what they want it has the reverse affect along the lines of 'right, fine, that's it we're going home and you are not having anything again, you are totally ruined, you obviously get far too much' and I walk away from it. And they are beginning to learn now that they are better off not even asking.

**3.7** For some mothers, the incessant, commercial 'wants' of their children triggered in them a type of generational nostalgia whereby what were perceived to be relatively consumption-free childhoods of the past were lamented as a 'lost age' of childhood innocence and appreciation of the value of money:

**Alice** - Especially if you go shopping it's 'can I have this?'. Like, I think when we were kids you were lucky if you got some sweets maybe once a week but now if you go out with the kids they expect something everytime.

**3.8** Whilst they may not always be successful in eliciting a purchase by parents, children's influence attempts can actively *shape* attitudes to consumption within the household and, in doing so, affect power relations between themselves, their siblings and their parents (as well as their social networks beyond the household). Children, for instance, may appoint themselves as 'experts' on the childrenswear market, possessing up-to-date knowledge through exposure to mass media about the latest fashion trends and must-have purchases. They might also engage with and adopt aspects of their peer culture such as language and refer to 'hoodies' or 'sk8er jeans' as prized garments with the knock-on effect of tween/teen culture appearing as somewhat alien and unknown to grown-ups and thus extending the generational gap between parents and children. Several examples from the focus groups we conducted with children themselves highlight these facets of their consuming experiences:

**Sebastian:** O'Neill and all Quicksilver and everything are meant to be quite fashionable. Erm, well quite a lot of people wear them [...] well it's something that's quite cool to do and everything.

**Douglas:** (speaking about his Nike trainers) - Those trainers are probably like very, very expensive and they are hard to probably get and then when people come around to your house you could probably tell them that they are your trainers. You probably want them to be jealous of you like to make them like you a bit more.

**Cameron** - Different logos you wear they don't give you a better impression, some just give you a worst impression.

**Gayle** - People see what you look like before they realise what you are like so they judge you before they really find out your personality so you show your personality in what you are wearing.

So whilst trying to ascertain autonomy and independence from their parents (and their parents' consumption) children are digesting and actively inserting themselves in a consumer discourse that encourages conformity and similarity in their peer-based social networks.

**3.9** Moreover, in the extracts which follow, we can see an inversion or contraction of the traditional power dynamics between child and parent with regards to what clothes *children* considered inappropriate and unsuitable for their parents and how attempted to initiate parent modernisation. Hayley (aged 8) talks us through a photograph she has taken of her mother Janet:

**Hayley** - Now this is the dodgy category [...] Well...Well she's just got a kind of glum face. Well I don't like the jeans...definitely should be darker, and I don't like them because they get all narrow at the ends.

**Chris** - Narrow at the ends...they're not flared.

**Hayley** - I don't care if they're not flared, but it's just like if they were wide all the way down.

**Chris** - Why is that not acceptable?

**Hayley** - Because it just...I just don't like it like that, because it...the jeans cling. And in the holiday I said I hate trousers that cling to people's legs.

**Janet** - She told me before we set off that I looked truly awful.

**3.10** Similarly, Robert and his mother tried to extend the fashion consciousness they shared and enjoyed together to the rest of the family:

**Kate** (Robert's Mom) We are trying to get Daddy trendy aren't we?

**Robert**: Yeah because now I've got into skater things he's sort of getting spikey hair and he's got sort of these skater trousers.

**Sharon**: Oh he's trying to look trendy as well?

**Kate**: We bought Daddy some skater jeans didn't we?

**Robert**: Yeah.

**3.11** Intergenerational exchanges like these may on the one hand suggest a blurring and confusing as to where the power balance lies between parent and child when it comes to possessing the expertise required to create a fashioned body. Yet, equally, such exchanges encourage the sharing of a fashion culture or typology (the 'sk8er' look in one case above) and may serve to lessen the ways in which children and adults are made to be distinct through the consumption of a particular sector of material culture.

## Conclusion

**4.1** To conclude, then, this paper has presented findings from a research project on children and fashion, contributing to a broader knowledge base on the penetration of the domestic sphere by consumer culture, especially in terms of the intergenerational dynamics of consumption. Via the lens of fashion I have sought to document both the changing behaviour and status of children as consuming agents and the corresponding roles and responsibilities of parents when faced with their children's increasing exposure to and participation in an expanding consumer market.

**4.2** It has been argued that children's increasing engagement with consumer culture appears to be changing the relationships they have with their parents and, indeed, family life itself. Children inherently demonstrate a growing autonomy from their parents in terms of the products they chose and their methods of choosing. We have also seen examples of children assuming an authority to modernise parent's tastes and the behaviour of parents being compromised by a peer pressure on them to consume as urged by their children. Yet, somewhat contradictorily, at the very same time children are using their status as savvy, sophisticated consumers to gain some sense of independence from their parents (especially with reference to what their parents would like to dress them in) they are faced with a series of objective and subjective constraints that structure their consumption patterns in various ways. As such, issues such as cost, the lures of label culture, wanting to 'fit in' with one's peer group, and trying to express personal tastes through clothing all add to the mix of decisions and choices that make-up the complex, commercialised nature of contemporary childhood.

**4.3** Children's mass consumption of fashion may be a new phenomenon given the explosion of commercial opportunities now available to them, yet the very issues which come to light when exploring it are longstanding ones in studies of family relations - issues surrounding conflict, resolution, power and (in)dependence, all come to the fore as children become all too consumed with consumption.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on work done for an ESRC/AHRB funded study, as part of their *Cultures of Consumption* programme, entitled *New Consumers? Children's Consumption of Fashion*, conducted with colleagues Dr Tim Edwards, Dr Jane Pilcher and Dr Christopher Pole at the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester. The project began by conducting focus groups in areas selected to reflect national variations in class, ethnicity, income levels and access to commercial opportunities - 7 focus groups with parents were conducted in total, 2 in a remote rural village in the northeast of England, 2 in a fairly affluent English shire city, 2 in a disadvantaged area of a Midlands city and 1 in London. Focus groups were selected as the most useful method of eliciting conversation about the shared experiences of parents in the face of their children's increasing engagement with consumer culture. Yet, as these focus groups generated parental dialogue only, the decision was taken in the latter stages of the study to hold child-centred focus groups in similar areas (5 in total) in order to generate data on how consumption is framed from a child's point of view. Our ethnographic work involved home visits with 7 families spread across England (selected via the parent focus groups). Each family had a least one child between the ages of 6 and 11 and had the following characteristics:

**Table 1**

Location	Rural Village in Northeast England	Rural village in Northeast England	Midlands inner city	Midlands inner city	English shire city	English shire city	Outskirts of London
Children	Megan, 7 William, 9	Hayley, 8	Saima, 12 Yasmeen, 7	Joseph, 15 Todd, 11 Craig, 6	Emma, 6 Jennifer, 10 Hattie, 13*	Liam, 5 Robert, 8	Katy, 8 Suzie, 11
Mother	Joanne, 43	Janet, 48	Hardeep, 37	Joan, 37	Mary, 36	Kate, 36	Amanda, 34
Father	Harry, 48	N/A	Sanjit, 41	John, 38	Tom, 38	Mike, 36	Jamie, 36
Mother's Work	P/T playgroup assistant	F/T teacher in prisons	No	No	No (guide dog trainer)	P/T retail	P/T childcare
Father's Work	F/T Farrier	N/A	F/T self employed - market stall	F/T Nightshift Makros	F/T Technical manager	F/T left blank	F/T telecommunications
Marital Status	Married	Divorced	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married
Income	£20-£30K	£30K	£10-20K	£20-30K	£30-40K	£30-£40K	£60-70K
Ethnicity	Left Blank	White British	British Asian	British	British	White English	British
Religion	No	Active C of E	No, (one other occasions said Muslims)	Active Jehovah's Witnesses	No	C of E	C of E

\* Cousin of Emma and Jennifer. Her mother is Caroline, 38, married to Morris, 41. Caroline works part-time as a civil servant and her husband is a full time buyer. Annual income between £20-30K, British, Church of England.

Each family was visited 5 times over the course of a full calendar year. Activities undertaken with the children included semi-structured interviews, fashion 'likes' and 'dislikes' projects in which they had the opportunity to write, draw and stick pictures in, a photographic project where children were given a disposable camera to record images of clothes, and accompanied shopping trips. Parents also participated in interviews and completed clothing diaries. All focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using established methods based on Grounded Theory approaches (Glaser and Strauss 1967) utilising the qualitative data analysis software NUD:IST where appropriate. Pseudonyms for individuals, geographical locations, schools and other institutions were used in all documentation from the outset of the study.

<sup>2</sup>Further evidence confirming the importance of children as consumers exists beyond clothing consumption. For instance, as Consumer Goods UK 1999 states, 11-16 year old females are the 2<sup>nd</sup> heaviest users of colour cosmetics, or, as statistics on the British Vegetarian Society's website show, around 10% of children and young people currently identify themselves as Vegetarian or avoiders of red meat and make the active decision to consume appropriate alternative foodstuffs.



<sup>3</sup>Notable exceptions include Russell and Tyler's (2002) study of the commercial context of feminine childhood, Cahill's study of pre-school children's use of clothing (Cahill 1989), and Swain's study of 10-11 year old children and the importance they attach to clothing and footwear (Swain 2002).

<sup>4</sup>An argument expanded in James et al (1998).

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